

*Simone Weil*

and took possession' of her as she meditated on those unforgettable words of George Herbert: 'Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin.' At some level, she knew more than she realized, and accepted more than her mind could cope with; and we can only pray that the realization was given to her at the last.

*From a lecture given during Holy Week 2009 in Canterbury Cathedral.*

## *Etty Hillesum*

1914–43

### A compulsion to kneel

Etty Hillesum, who died in Auschwitz in 1943, left behind her a journal covering the two years before her deportation and death. It is an extraordinarily full and absorbing document which chronicles a complex sexual and emotional life, a deepening immersion in Rilke and Dostoevsky and a religious conversion of a very unconventional order. Her Jewishness is both a matter of immense significance – this is Holland in the 1940s – and curiously muted as a religious theme. Like others, it is as if she travelled to her roots by a long detour through the religion and imagination of modern Europe. But among much that is arresting in what she writes, the repeated references to 'learning to kneel' give a clue to something of what she understood by 'God'.

Praying is a physically intimate matter. In 1942, she recorded the sheer difficulty of writing about the urge to kneel which 'sometimes pulses through my body, or rather it is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling . . . It has become a gesture embedded in my body, needing to be expressed from time to

time'. And to say this is more embarrassing 'than if I had to write about my love life'.<sup>1</sup> The gesture is demanded by some inner 'welling-up', a sense of 'plentitude' which transforms the grey landscape of dawn into spaciousness.<sup>2</sup> And it is accompanied by a 'listening in' to the self.<sup>3</sup> Yet this listening is and is not a simple scrutiny of the self: 'it is really God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God.' Loving attention to others is a clearing of 'the path toward You in them'.<sup>4</sup>

It is not easy to disentangle exactly what is being said in all this. Etty Hillesum can speak of thanking God for indwelling her<sup>5</sup> and writes in relation to St Augustine, 'Truly those are the only love letters one ought to write: love letters to God.'<sup>6</sup> God is regularly invoked as source and giver. It would be wrong to read her as simply identifying God with a dimension of the self, something contained in the self, yet it is clear that her sense of God is inseparable from the sense of something growing 'inside'. She quotes approvingly Rilke's *Das Stunden-Buch*: '*Auch wenn wir nicht wollen: Gott reift*' ('Even if we don't want it: God ripens')<sup>7</sup> – the conclusion of a long section dealing with the growth of a sort of divine image in us.

What the journals present is a process of impassioned discovery. Her prayers, in the entries for these days, are exceptionally vivid and immediate; again we find the emphasis on kneeling, 'almost naked, in the middle of the floor, completely "undone"',<sup>8</sup> the struggle to be 'faithful' to God, and, above all, the sense of accumulating something, growing in a way that carries a sort of responsibility. This is a life in which a task is accepted: a task that can be defined only as that of allowing God to 'ripen' in increasingly visible ways.

What this involves comes more plainly to light in the harrowing letters from the transit camp at Westerbork. She had written earlier of accepting suffering as 'passive activity', of the need to accept suffering that is in no sense chosen, including the trials that come from genetic and temperamental givens.<sup>9</sup> She quotes André Suarès on Dostoevsky: 'Pain is not the site of our longing, but the site of our certainty',<sup>10</sup> meaning that suffering is neither to be mastered nor to be fled but to be utilized and transformed. The 'site' is given: unavoidable suffering is what it is, not a stimulus to a longing for a better place or a pedagogy-for moral improvement, but a datum which our humanity must humanize.

It is this that perhaps helps us understand what is going on in her thinking about God: the self develops

as a place where certain realities can find a home, realities that are in one sense very much the inner business of the self and yet are unsought, not generated by the will or the imagination, but implanted – could we say? – by a life history.

A perceptive commentator has candidly reported her occasional frustration at the lack of what might be thought a proper anger here; I am less sure. The letters from Westerbork leave no ambiguity about her sensations of horror and disgust and, I think, anger at the atrocities she witnesses. But we have to take very seriously the imagery of giving space. She is wholly persuaded that she has a task of internal housekeeping for her imagination and emotion that is to do with guaranteeing that certain things do not disappear from the human landscape. If anger drives out grief, something has disappeared that has the capacity to remake broken human bonds, because grief can be recognized and shared across a conflict, and anger can't. Most decisively, what she believes she is doing is what can best be described as taking responsibility for God in the situation.

You cannot help us . . . we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and

also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?<sup>12</sup>

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